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# Observing the Oxymoron

Shakespeare loved to play with words. There has probably been no other writer of English who played with words more than he did. One result of this is that his plays are full of figurative language.

*Figurative language* is the intentional use or arrangement of words in ways which are different from their usual use in order to make an expression more effective. One kind of figurative language is the *simile*, in which we compare one thing to another by using the word *like* or *as*. One example of a simile is “My love is like a red, red rose,” in which love is compared to a rose.

Another form of figurative language is the *metaphor*, in which we compare one thing to another by speaking of it as though it is the other. An example of a metaphor would be “My love is a red, red rose.” Here we say love *is* a rose, not that it is *like it*. When Romeo says, “Juliet is the sun,” he is using a metaphor.

A kind of figurative language with an unusual name is the *oxymoron*. In an oxymoron, successive words seem to contradict each other, such as the following:

- double solitaire
- strongest weakness
- make haste slowly
- pretty ugly
- grownup children
- cruel kindness
- a little big

In groups of two or three, try to find the following oxymorons in *Romeo and Juliet*. Write them in the chart below, recording the act and scene in which you found each one.

<i>sweet sorrow</i>
<i>loving hate</i>
<i>bitter sweeting</i>
<i>honorable villain</i>

Can you find three or more oxymorons in addition to the ones above? List them in the chart with the acts and scenes in which you found them.

Oxymoron	Act	Scene

# The Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet*

<i>Two households, both alike in dignity</i>	a
<i>(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene),</i>	b
<i>From Ancient grudge break to new mutiny,</i>	a
<i>Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.</i>	b
<i>From forth the fatal loins of these two foes</i>	c
<i>A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;</i>	d
<i>Whose misadventured piteous overthrows</i>	c
<i>Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.</i>	d
<i>The fearful passage of their death-marked love</i>	e
<i>And the continuance of their parents' rage,</i>	f
<i>Which, but their children's end, naught could remove,</i>	e
<i>Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;</i>	f
<i>The which, if you with patient ears attend,</i>	g
<i>What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.</i>	g

Usually a writer bends over backward to avoid letting the reader know the outcome of the story ahead of time. It is said that if a writer releases too much of the plot of a story too soon, the reader will not care to read any further. Yet here is one of the greatest of all English writers telling us at the beginning of a play that our two young lovers will die because of their parents' anger and wish for revenge. He is giving us a warning of what can happen to innocent people caught in the web of someone else's hate.

The use of a chorus to comment on the action of a play was a familiar literary device in ancient drama. The old Greek plays of Sophocles, for example, usually had a chorus commenting throughout the play about what was happening and making judgments of whether the characters could have done other than what they did in the play. The Ancient Greeks believed that all events were planned by the gods and that man, no matter how noble, could not change the course of fate. The Greek chorus continually pointed out the proofs of this during a play.



## Activity

Acts I and II begin with a chorus reciting in the form of a sonnet what is happening and what is going to happen. Act III, however, does not begin with a chorus, nor do Acts IV and V. After reading Act III, write a chorus to be recited at the beginning of the act. If you enjoy writing poetry and would like to try writing your chorus in the form of a sonnet, by all means do so. The rhyme scheme for a sonnet may be found to the right of the box above. If you are more comfortable writing prose, write your chorus in prose.